Desire in Eastern Orthodox Praxis

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Desire in Eastern Orthodox *Praxis*

Michael Bakker

> "Human beings are not and never were, nor were ever meant to be, solely intellectual beings, as the angels, but they embrace both dimensions of creation, the asexual rational part and the sexual irrational" (Behr 1999, 235).

Praxis is a word used by practical theologians to refer to their discipline. This word, however, was and is also used by Greek-speaking ascetics and theologians to describe an important aspect of Christian spiritual life. The primary aim of this chapter is to clarify what is meant by the latter type of *praxis* and in what context it is used. On this basis, I will explore what place human desire has in an Eastern Christian view of human nature and how it can be transformed into love. In passing, I will try to discern points of contact and contrast between Eastern *praxis* and Western *praxis*.

Desire has a central place in what is called *praxis* by the Greek Church Fathers. In fact, a practical framework has been developed for turning this enormous force to good use. It is based on the conviction that, though every human being is suffering from the effects of the Fall, he or she is basically good. Through the dynamic processes of *praxis*, *theoria* (contemplation), and *theologia* (mystical vision), human beings are able to attain *apatheia* (dispassion), an active state that enables the spiritual warrior not to yield to the attacks of the demons that try to incline him or her to evil desires.

Because the images of demons, though widely used in the Gospels, may sound unfamiliar to modern ears, we will first begin with a succinct introduction to the ascetic writings of Eastern Orthodox teaching on desire. This is followed by a description of Orthodox anthropology, because it forms the point of departure for practicing the virtues: the process of managing and transforming the irrational part of the soul from which desire arises. This ascetic battle takes place as part of personal and communal mystagogy or initation, which is briefly described. Finally, we will have a closer look at the management of desire according to Orthodox praxis itself.

The Christian East: Continuity and Innovation

In the fourteenth century, a theological dispute arose in Byzantium about the "prayer of the heart" or "Jesus Prayer" (a short prayer repeated many times or continuously) and the exegesis of 2 Peter 1:4 ("partakers of the divine nature"). While the Turks were encroaching on what remained of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, Greek theologians were discussing whether a human being's physical abilities can be refined and rendered spiritual so as to make him or her capable of seeing the divine light. Hesychast (from *hesychia*, stillness) experience and teaching maintained that, although the divine essence remains inaccessible, a human being can partake of the divine energies. The notable objections of Barlaam the Calabrian were countered at three councils convened in Constantinople in 1341, 1347 and 1351, which instead accepted *The Declaration of the Holy Mountain*, also known as the "Hagioretic Tome". Its author,

St Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica, points out that the body may in this present life already taste of the heavenly delights:

> If in the age to come the body is to share with the soul in ineffable blessings, then it is evident that in this world as well it will also share according to its capacity in the grace mystically and ineffably bestowed by God upon the purified intellect, and it will experience the divine in conformity with its nature. For once the soul's passible aspect is transformed and sanctified – but not reduced to a deathlike condition – through it the dispositions and activities of the body are also sanctified, since the body and the soul share a conjoint existence (*Philokalia* 4, 423).

The defenders of the Jesus Prayer carried the day and since that time *hesychasm* or the practice of inner prayer has a very prominent place in the Eastern church. This is also reflected in the choice of texts that make up the ascetic anthology called the *Philokalia,* which has contributed tremendously to the spiritual renaissance of the Greek, Rumanian, and Slavic peoples. It was first printed as such in 1782, a seminal event for the Eastern Orthodox comparable to the significance of the first publication of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to Western philosophy a year earlier (Louth 2003, 352). Besides the Hagioretic Tome, some of the ascetical writings of Evagrios of Pontus were included in this huge collection (his work *On Prayer* under the name of Neilos). Evagrios' practical writings are primarily concerned with prayer techniques and managing the passions, and are full of psychological insight, such as the following:

> The demon is very envious of us when we pray, and uses every kind of trick to thwart our purpose. Therefore he is always using our memory to stir up thoughts of various things and our flesh to arouse the passions, in order to obstruct our way of ascent to God. (...) What is it that the demons wish to excite in us? Gluttony, unchastity, avarice, anger, rancor, and the rest of the passions, so that the intellect grows coarse and cannot pray as it ought. For when the passions are aroused in the non-rational part of our nature, they do not allow the intellect to function properly (*Philokalia* 1, 61).

Anselm Grün (1980) draws a parallel between Evagrios and the psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who uses terms such as "complex" and "projection" which are much more familiar to a modern audience. According to Grün, the ancient ascetics, who had an intense experience in dealing with evil, were using a "mythological language" to describe the tricks and techniques of different types of demons. Modern persons might designate these actions differently using Jungian terminology: such a person is coping with his or her "shadow" or the "personal" and "collective unconscious". Whatever you call its source, an ascetic – or any human being – has to deal with an impassioned thought entering his or her mind. Kallistos Ware describes in *The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity* the process of bringing this *logismos* (thought) out into the open (Ware 2000, 137):

> The method proposed here by the early monks has interesting similarities with the techniques of modern psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. But the early monks had worked out this method fifteen centuries before Freud and Jung! There is, of course, an important difference: the early monks did not employ the notions of the unconscious in the way that modern psychology does, even though they recognized that with our conscious understanding we are usually aware of only a small part of ourselves.

Orthodox Anthropology

Another writer who received a prominent place in the *Philokalia* is St Maximos the Confessor (580-662). One of his works, *The Centuries on Love* (four collections of a hundred maxims each in *Philokalia* 2, 52-100) is much concerned with *praxis*: living out the Christian life, which inevitably involves coming to terms with passions such as bodily desires. "Practical theologian" is an apt description of Maximos, who knew the ascetic struggle from experience and was consulted as a spiritual counselor. He is representative of the fundamentally experiential patristic tradition and demonstrates the "essential unity of what has come to be called in the West 'theology' and 'spirituality', a unity that Orthodoxy, as its best, has preserved" (Louth 2003, 357).

Maximos was also a great and original thinker. His *Mystagogia* (not included in the *Philokalia*) has a chapter entitled "How and in what manner the holy Church of God symbolically represents man and how it is represented by him as man." This comparison underlines the cosmic character of Maximos' theology, in which the human person is presented as a microcosm with the vocation to reintegrate his or her own self, fragmented by the passions and, similarly, mediate between separated parts of the surrounding macrocosm (see Balthasar 1961). In the following drawing (*fig. 1*), I have tried to capture the parallels between the human person and the church in order to make Orthodox anthropology "iconic". The basic distinction between body and soul is symbolically represented by the distinction between the nave and the sanctuary. By drawing an icon screen with three doors, I assume that in the time of Maximos a partition separating the sanctuary from the rest of the church was already in place. The altar table at the centre of the sanctuary corresponds to the *nous* (spiritual intellect). The Greek Church Fathers prefer the classical *nous* to the Pauline *pneuma* (spirit) to designate the core of the soul, which is the part of a person that reflects *par excellence* the image of God (see Genesis 1:26).

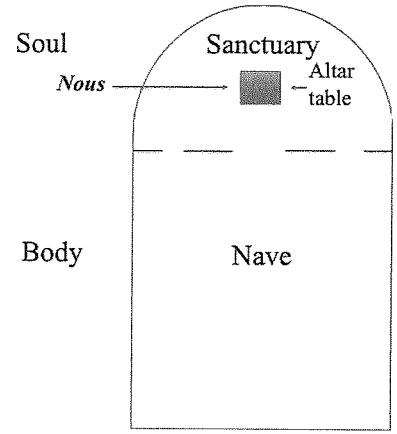

Fig. 1: Church architecture and the tripartite division of man

That Christianity has made extensive use of classical philosophy to express its mysteries is evident from its employment of Plato's image in *Phaedrus* of the soul as a chariot drawn by the *epithumetikon* (desiring power) and the *thumikon* (aggressive power) and steered ("managed") by the *logistikon* (thinking power, see Rowe 2005, 26-39). This

classic trichotomy was integrated into Patristic theology. The Greek Fathers used it in their exegesis of the three temptations of Christ (Matthew 4:1-11): the desiring power can lead to gluttony, the intelligent power to *hubris* and the aggressive power to tyranny over fellow humans.

According to the fifth chapter of the *Mystagogia*, the thinking part of the soul can be subdivided into 1) the *theoretikon* or contemplative power, with the *nous* as its focal point; and 2) the *praktikon* or active power, which has the *logos* (reason) as its primary faculty. Thus, in ancient Greek Christian anthropology, reason serves the *nous*, the spiritual or intuitive intellect. From the way in which we fall in love, we know that many, often major, decisions are made not rationally, but intuitively or "noetically"; arguments are often mobilized only after the decision has already been taken.

In *St John Damascene,* Andrew Louth (2002, 168) discusses John's rendering of the Maximian teaching on human psychology and indicates the explicit bridge between ascetic (practical) and dogmatic theology. He quotes Iris Murdoch: "Freedom is not strictly exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action." Louth continues, "From this point of view, deliberation is what we fall back on when our vision is clouded or confused: it is a measure of our *lack* of freedom, not the signal exercise of freedom." With regard to desire, this means that, in the Orthodox view, decisions about whether a desire is good or wrong and whether or not it should be pursued are more a matter of following your vision than through discursive arguing with oneself or another. However, cautious *diakrisis* (discernment) is needed:

> Do not pray for the fulfillment of your desires, for they may not accord with the will of God. But pray as you have been taught, saying: Thy will be done in me (cf. Luke 22:42). Always entreat Him in this way – that His will be done. For He desires what is good and profitable for you, whereas you do not always ask for this (*Philokalia* 1, 60).

According to Maximos' elaborate theory of human willing, inspired by Aristotle, which we cannot treat here for lack of space, the starting point of an act of will is the natural appetite. This appetite is in principle good because humans are by nature good:

> Appetites and pleasures, which are in accordance with nature, are not reprehensible, since they are a necessary consequence of natural appetency. For our ordinary food, whether we wish it or not, naturally produces pleasure, since it satisfies the hunger which precedes a meal. Drink also produces pleasure, since it relieves the discomfort of thirst; so does sleep, since it renews the strength expended in our waking hours; and so, too, do all our other natural functions necessary for maintaining life and conducive to the acquisition of virtue (*Philokalia* 2, 206).

As Christopher Cook (2011, 95) wryly remarks, this positive statement about the passions in the *Philokalia* is only an "affirmative whisper amidst the noise of more vocal negative views of the passions as pathology of the soul or as hostile demonic forces." This is not surprising for a collection written by monks who have chosen the path of "divine eros" through radical *askesis* (training) of the soul and body. For a monastic, life is in some ways easier because he or she can embark on battling *all* the passions, whether they are good or bad. Maximos continues: "But every intellect that is trying to escape from the confusion of sin transcends such passions, lest through them it remains a slave to passions which are subject to our control, contrary to nature and reprehensible" (*Philokalia* 2, 206).

It should be mentioned that in the Eastern view sexual desire is natural. While bishops started to be recruited from among celibate men already in the early, undivided church, celibacy never became obligatory for Orthodox priests and deacons. It is hardly surprising that the rather traditional Orthodox church reserves sex for within a marriage between a man and a woman. Gregory Palamas (*Philokalia* 4, 328) writes: "If you do not choose to live in virginity and have not promised God that you will do this, God's law allows you to marry one woman [divorce and remarriage are allowed under certain conditions] and to live with her alone and to hold her in holiness as your own wife (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:4), abstaining entirely from other women." Preciously little has been written, though, for married couples; the Orthodox have only started to formulate their own answers to the bioethical issues with which the modern world confronts them.

The "Impassioned Love Songs for God" (or "Hymns of Divine Eros") of St. Symeon the New Theologian, some of whose non-poetical works are included in the *Philokalia*, describe the union between God and humanity in erotic terms: "The parallel often drawn between sexual intercourse and Eucharistic celebration is neither overly romantic nor frivolous. Both actions presuppose sacramental consecration and culminate in consummation, which achieves communion with the beloved" (Breck 1998, 93). Of the books in the Bible, it is the Song of Songs that is taken by Origen as belonging to *theologia* or mystical union with God. This is the final stage of what I will call below "personal mystagogy". Mystagogy is a process of being led into a mystery, in this case of your own person. But let us turn first to corporate worship or "communal mystagogy", leading to mystical union with God. For all the writers of the *Philokalia*, and for the Church fathers in general, liturgy was their natural habitat. Moreover, for Eastern Christians the subdisciplines of Western practical theology, such as pastoral care, homiletics, religious education, liturgics, and social service, are closely connected to the heart of belief in action: the liturgical life.

The Habitat of Communal Mystagogy

In addition to its rich dogmatic theology, enshrined in its liturgical poetry, Orthodoxy has at its heart two great ineffable mysteries: the mystery of God and the mystery of the human person. A person relates to God primarily in prayer through the *nous*, the spiritual intellect. This relationship finds its practical fulfillment in the sacraments (*mysteria* in the Greek) of the church, of which the Eucharist is the sacrament *par excellence*. Importantly, sacraments also involve bodies, your own and those of others. Spiritual growth is not only a matter of "the alone to the Alone", because personal mystagogy is inextricably connected with communal mystagogy, as Maximos describes in his *Mystagogia*. In his account of the Eucharistic rite he dramatically leads the reader to the mystery of communion and then remains largely silent. In this way, he respects the ancient *disciplina arcani*: in order not to profane the mystery of communion Christians did not speak about it to the non-baptized. One is tempted to compare this hesitance in speech with the way the privacy of what takes place between two lovers is often respected with silence.

The three stages of communal mystagogy are (1) entrance of the bishop and the people into the church, (2) readings from the Bible, after which the catechumens are dismissed,

and (3) communion. The present form of the Eucharistic service does not differ much from the seventh century usage that Maximos describes in his *Mystagogia*:

> There is first a passage from outside the church building into the nave. (...) Ancient liturgies were extraordinarily processional in character; something which is betrayed also by the elongated structure of early basilicas. After the entrance into the temple, each rank (catechumens, penitents, lay people, and clergy) would resume their place within an area specifically assigned to them. (...) The bishop enters the church passing through the nave into the sanctuary where he mounts the throne; there follow readings from the Old Testament, the Epistles, and the Gospels; the bishop then descends from the throne, and the catechumens and the penitents are dismissed, after which the external doors are closed by the deacons; the gifts are then brought to the bishop; the creed and the Sanctus are said; then follow the Lord's prayer and the 'One is Holy', and finally, as the culmination of the liturgy, the communion of the 'sacrament' takes place (Törönen 2007, 150-151).

Below is a graphic representation of (only) the movements described above (*fig. 2*):

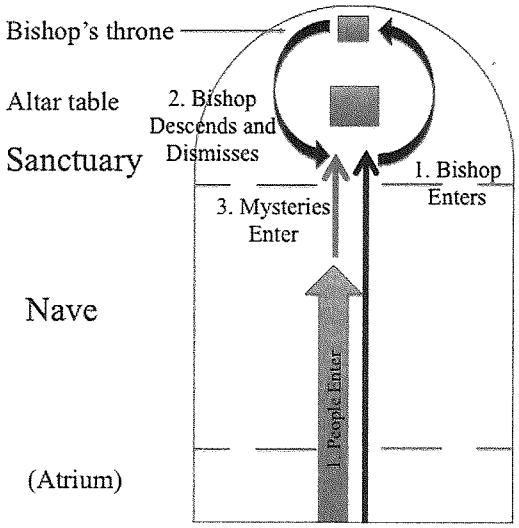

Fig. 2: Movements during Communal Mystagogy

The three stages of communal mystagogy have parallel stages in personal mystagogy, as we will see in the next section.

Personal mystagogy

In the fourth chapter of the *Mystagogia*, Maximos names three stages of personal mystagogy (Berthold 1985, 190; I adapted the translation): "By means of the nave, representing the body, it proposes *ethical philosophy*, while by means of the sanctuary, representing the soul, it spiritually interprets *contemplation of nature*, and by means of the *nous* of the divine altar it manifests *mystical theology*." Figure 3 depicts these stages. Because the *nous* is sometimes seen as the eye of the soul (Nemesios 1987, 1), I represent it as an eye.

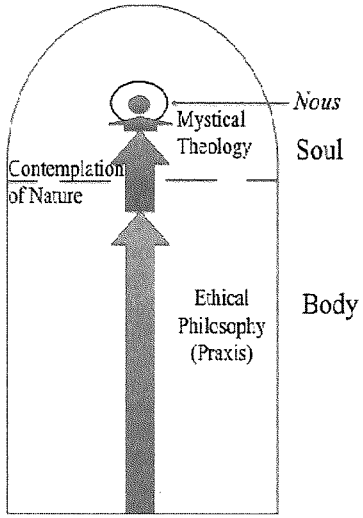

Fig. 3: Three stages of personal mystagogy

Maximos uses different words for the three stages of personal mystagogy (*praxis*, *theoria* and *theologia*) in the second collection of his *Centuries on Love*:

> When the intellect practices the virtues correctly, it advances in moral understanding. When it practices contemplation, it advances in spiritual knowledge. The first leads the spiritual contestant to discriminate between virtue and vice; the second leads the participant to the inner qualities of incorporeal and corporeal things. Finally, the intellect is granted the grace of theology when, carried on wings of love beyond these two former stages, it is taken up to God and with the help of the Holy Spirit discerns – as far as this is possible for the human intellect – the qualities of God (*Philokalia* 2, 26).

To show that there is terminological variety inside the Maximian corpus and among ascetical writers, I produce below an overview of the different names for the division of spiritual life, as it is generally accepted, into three stages:

Vita	1 practica	2 contemplativa	3 mystica
Origen	ethike (Proverbs)	physike (Ecclesiastes)	enoptike (Song of Songs)
Gregory of Nyssa	light	cloud	darkness
Evagrius of Pontus	praktike	physike	theologia (gnosis)
Dionysius the Areopagite	purificatory	illuminative	perfective unitive
Maximus, in *Centuries*	praxis	theoria	theologia
Maximus, in *Mystagogia*	ethical philosophy	contemplation of nature	mystical theology

Table 1: Three stages of spiritual mystagogy (mainly on the basis of Louth 1981)

Typical of the stage of contemplation (*theoria*) is a discernment of the inner principles (*logoi*) of the "book of nature" and of the Bible. The end of the spiritual journey or

personal mystagogy is associated with a mystical stage that entails seeing and knowing but also darkness and un-knowing. This process, called "deification", involves communion with God by partaking of God's energies.

The representation of personal mystagogy in Table 1 is rather schematic, because *praxis* and *theoria* may take place concurrently. While treating Gregory of Nyssa in *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, Louth (1981, 82) thus speaks of *moments* instead of stages:

> It is, however, less clear in Gregory that these ways are strictly *successive*, as in Origen. For example, the first way is said to be the way of purification but also of illumination, which is also characteristic of the second way. There is, then, at least overlapping between the three ways. But it seems that the true state of affairs is rather that these three ways are not so much three *stages* as three *moments* in the soul's approach to God.

Because the reality of spiritual *askesis* or training consists of cycles of falling and getting up again, an additional nuance is needed. In fact, Maximos lists in his second collection of his *Centuries on Love* five reasons why God allows us to be assailed by demons, the most important of which is that "having achieved dispassion (*apatheia*) we should forget neither our own weakness nor the power of Him who has helped us" (*Philokalia* 2, 67). So, these attacks train us to acquire humility and that state wherein our reintegrated microcosm is free to choose between vice and virtue and manage its desires.

The Management of Desire as part of Praxis

Many religions share the application of prayer and the control of bodily desires (fasting) as a way of preparing for major events. With regard to ascetical practices, a parallel between Orthodoxy and Buddhism is often drawn; such parallels, and those with other religions, are indeed interesting to explore. After all, the range of instruments for the management of desire are limited and may appear to be similar to an outsider: examining the stream of thoughts, preventing the sight of attractive men or women, limiting the amount of protein eaten (by abstaining from meat, amongst others), long vigils, sleeping on the floor, tiring the body with prostrations and labors, to name a few examples. One might even be tempted to compare the Orthodox practice of severe fasting during Great Lent with the mortification of the flesh to which anorexics submit themselves. In the Orthodox context, however, it is a struggle *for* the body, not against it: "It is not the body itself, nor the senses nor the passible faculties themselves which are evil, but only their wrong use. (...) Self-love [*filautia*] is defined as love for the body, not because the body is linked with evil, but because attachment to the body prevents man's entire attachment to his divine end" (Thunberg 1995, 247).

Orthodox *praxis* and *theoria* represent the end of a long development from Aristotle's *bios praktikos* and *bios theoretikos*. By the fourth century, Eastern Christianity had developed into a tradition in which *praxis* and *theoria* were not separate activities but rather inextricably linked, in which the pursuit of virtue is not an end in itself but a preparation. Moreover, the title of Maximos' ascetical *Centuries on Love* indicates precisely what is of primary importance. Christian life is a *synergia* with God, in which the energies (grace) of God support the one who has made the small but crucial step of believing. As the booklet *Way of the Ascetics*, as much cherished by the Orthodox as the

huge *Philokalia*, says: "The holy Fathers say with one voice: The first thing to keep in mind is never in any respect to rely on yourself. The warfare that now lies before you is extraordinarily hard, and your own human powers are altogether insufficient to carry it on. If you rely on them you will immediately be felled to the ground and have no desire to continue the battle. Only God can give you the victory you wish" (Colliander 1998, 4). Thus, the phrase "management of desire" is rather dangerous because it may lead to pride, the vice that precipitated Lucifer's fall, which in turn led to the fall of Adam and Eve, who themselves could not control their desire.

Epilogue

To come back to the concern voiced in the introduction, I would like to quote Kallistos Ware and his co-editors, writing in their introduction to the *Philokalia* (1, 16-17):

> One is confronted with a psychology, or science of the soul, many of whose fundamental features – particularly perhaps in relation to the role of the demons – are completely unrecognized by, not to say at odds with, the theories of most modern psychologists. The contemporary reader, influenced directly or indirectly by these latter-day theories, may well be tempted to reject hesychastic psychology outright. But alternatively he may well be led first to question his own outlook and assumptions and then to modify or even abandon them in the light of the understanding with which he is now confronted.

Vice versa, the confrontation, or rather the dialogue, with Western *praxis* enables Eastern *praxis* to question its ancient views and articulate its relevance for modern man. Modern man, who is still trying to manage the perfectly natural desires for food, sex, knowledge and spiritual communion with the other and with the Other. Eastern Orthodox *praxis* makes this struggle part of the journey towards two great mysteries: the mystery of oneself and that of God. The central endeavors of training the body, disciplining the thoughts and acquiring a clear vision are supported by sub disciplines such as pastoral care, homiletics, religious education and social service. To have fellow-travelers on this journey, be they old, young, Western or Eastern, fulfills the desires for support and companionship.

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Consumerism, Desire, and Human Fulfillment

An Intercultural Approach

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Urban life around the globe is so caught up in consumerist frenzy that the latter significance generally escapes our grasp. Consuming in the strict sense of nourishir refers to the necessity of procuring and using material and natural resources fo satisfying one's primary needs in order to live and grow as a human person. It points t the natural dependency of humans on the physical and material environment fo survival and growth. In the contemporary world, however, consuming denotes more th satisfaction of post-material (secondary) desire, that is, using material and natura resources for fashioning one's self-image or self-identity. Although both types o consuming, namely, for satisfying (primary) needs and (secondary) desires, aim a human fulfillment, they imply different motives for using material and natura resources, and presuppose different visions of environmental and cosmic reality.

Deviations and excesses in the use of material goods for satisfying one's insatiabl desires may be termed as *consumerism*. In a throwaway society, the act of consumin seems to be losing its connection to human fulfillment, paving the way for huma degradation and depletion of natural resources. Hence, situating the human act o consuming in proper perspective has become an urgent task for the Christia community as well. What meaning can Christians give to their act of consuming? Hov does it relate to their human and Christian fulfillment? In other words, this chapte addresses the human act of consuming and the desire that underlies it from th practical theological perspective of human fulfillment. Practical theology may b described as a systematic reflection on the ecclesial-Christian-religious praxis o concrete communities with the view to nurturing their ultimate human fulfillment o salvation. Among practical theologians, there is a growing conviction that the praxis o believers – the material object of practical theology – be viewed on interrelated ecclesial, Christian, and religious planes, allowing for interecclesial, intercultural and interreligious dialogue on the fundamental aspects of such praxis (Midali 2011).

From a practical theological point of view, basic anthropological issues such as the act o consuming have to be considered in the life-experience of a concrete community, for its significance may depend not only on the Christian faith but also on the cultural context which shapes it. This explains my interest in situating the question of consumerism in the specific context of the Christian communities immersed in the Indic religio-cultural tradition, which refers to the conglomeration resulting from the traditions of Negroid, Australoid, Mongoloid, Dravidian, Aryan, and other races in the Indian context. Indic tradition could also be designated simply as Hindu culture, but this risks viewing it in a monolithic, narrow sense of Brahminic tradition. Considering the human act of consuming from the Indic religio-cultural stance could be enlightening not only for the Indian Christian community but also for Christian communities elsewhere in our interdependent world. Such an effort could also inspire other religious and non-